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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 000730

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PM](#) [LABOR](#) [HUMAN](#) [RIGHTSPOLMIL](#)

SUBJECT: ARTICLE 98 SUPPORTER IN CLOSE RACE WITH U.S.

SOLDIER'S MURDERER

REF: PANAMA 705

1. (U) This cable is SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED. Please protect accordingly.

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A Fighting Chance  
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2. (SBU) On March 14, PolOffs accompanied Arnulfista Party legislative challenger Jose "Pepe" Gomez on a tour of Veraguas province's 9-3 electoral circuit, encompassing Calobre, Santa Fe and San Francisco. (See ref for Veraguas campaign overview.) Gomez is in a close race with Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) legislative incumbent (and unconvicted murderer) Pedro Miguel Gonzalez. (See para 5 for background on the Sgt Zak Hernandez case.) Gomez, who as Secretary General of Panama's Legislative Assembly was helpful behind the scenes to Embassy during the debate of the Article 98 agreement (close hold), has spent over \$100,000 of his own money to challenge Gonzalez. Gomez claimed to be leading in the polls, and believes himself so strong that he may put Arnulfista presidential candidate Jose Miguel Aleman over the top in the circuit. (Note: In a separate meeting with PolOffs on March 14, the PRD's Veraguas elections coordinator Arturo Fabrega conceded that Gomez has a good chance to win the 9-3 seat. End note.)

3. (SBU) The Veraguas 9-3 circuit is expansive, stretching from San Francisco (just North of the provincial capital, Santiago) to the Atlantic Ocean. Arnulfista Gomez hails from Calobre, with nearly 10,000 registered voters of the circuit's 26,000. Gomez said he is running strong in his hometown and in San Francisco with its 7,000 voters. He admitted to be weak in Santa Fe, his opponent's home, which has 9,000 voters. It was in the far reaches of this circuit that in 1999 then EmbOffs witnessed PRD Gonzalez' tactic of "vote verification"-- pressuring elderly voters to claim disabled status, which allowed Gonzalez lackeys to accompany them into the voting booth. Gonzalez has yet to arrive in the circuit to begin campaigning and is reportedly keeping his war chest in reserve for similar last-minute dirty tricks.

4. (SBU) Arnulfista Gomez fears a repeat of 1999 and asked for Embassy's assistance, to the extent possible, with his personal security, security at polling stations and observer teams throughout the district to document any irregularities.

Already aware that Embassy deliberately avoids funding humanitarian and development programs that would benefit PRD Gonzalez' circuit, Gomez expressed his hope that, if he unseats Gonzalez, Embassy would provide the area with humanitarian civil engineering projects like New Horizons and related Medical Readiness Training Exercises (MedReTEs), law enforcement and counternarcotics training for local National Police (PNP) units, and AID sustainable development programs aimed at small coffee growers. (Comment: Embassy plans to send observers to numerous electoral circuits throughout the country, including this hotly contested area. Embassy would consider humanitarian and development projects in this poor region only if Gonzalez were voted out of office. End comment.)

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Background  
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5. (SBU) In 1992, just days before then President George H.W. Bush visited Panama, US Army Sgt Zak Hernandez was fatally shot in broad daylight while driving his Humvee from Colon to Panama City. Witnesses at the scene described the passing vehicle and gunman, who was later identified by Panama's Technical Judicial Police (PTJ) as Pedro Miguel Gonzalez. The PTJ found the murder weapon on the property of Gonzalez' sister, and separate ballistic tests performed by the US

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the UK Scotland Yard linked the fatal shot to the AK-47. Gonzalez fled to Cuba, returning to Panama in 1994. His "surrender" to Panamanian authorities was engineered by newly-elected Panamanian President Ernesto Perez-Balladares. Gonzalez' father, Gerardo, was a close confidant of Perez-Balladares as well as a legislator and president of the PRD. The ensuing trial was fraught with irregularities and probable jury intimidation. Gonzalez was found not guilty in 1997. In 1999, Gonzalez succeeded his father as legislator from the Veraguas 9-3 circuit.

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